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Incomplete Draft

Thoughts On The Millennium Whole Earth Catalog

1.0 Introduction and Overview

1.1 Introduction

This paper is offered freely as a collection of ideas about how to maximize the Point Foundation's benefit from the Millennium Whole Earth Catalog Project. If I've done my job well, it represents both an integrated front to back approach to the project and a cookbook of ideas.

In no way am I suggesting that this is the best approach. It's more of an "If I ran the Zoo" plan.
Like all plans, it brings the benefits of a coherent strawman. It's a thing to chew on, tear apart, get mad at, revise, trash and provoke structured thinking about a complex problem. It is guaranteed to be flawed in many dimensions. It could only make real long term sense if 'owned' by the people who have to live with its consequences.

It's important to have a vehicle for public wrestling with the big picture and its details (both the forest and the trees). As I have no knowledge of the WER approach to this process, it's very presumptuous to suggest one. Plans live, breathe and change. If the MWEC team decides to use a plan like this, it should be a living breathing document.

There are several benefits to having a detailed written plan.

1. It provides a vehicle for ongoing discussion about the process;
2. It makes a great training aid when new people are introduced into the process
3. If detailed enough, it can provide a baseline for status and progress measurement
4. It provides a central guide for decision making reducing time spent in meetings

1.2 Some Notes On Organizations In Transition

It's very normal for groups to evolve through indecisive and rudderless times. The times when possibilities are greatest (both positive and negative) tend to be he times of deepest organizational stress and indecisiveness. It's very easy to manage these times poorly. The pressure to 'get the answer' is enormous. The team wants to know what's going on and gets impatient, frustrated and angry when you don't have immediate answers. If you're like me, you take a great deal of personal responsibility for the frustration and anxiety of the team and the individuals on the team.

It's tough to work in this kind of environment as either a leader or a team member.

My favorite psychology experiment goes something like this: (I hope it doesn't offend your animal rights sensibilities).

Put two rats in a cage with an electrical grid on the floor. Turn the power on. In very short order, the rats try to kill each other.

I think the experiment demonstrates a fundamental principle in the behavior of all mammals: warm blooded creatures tend to blame environmental stress on each other. It takes a great deal of practice and commitment to learn to communicate well and supportively under deep environmental pressure.

In groups, what usually happens is that an alternate description of reality, with mythical actors, develops. My experience is that one of the most consistent traits of human beings is the desire to make sense out of things.

When the simple truth is that 'things don't make sense right now', the rats in the cage look for someone or something to blame. Like all Whole Systems, this pressure shows its symptoms at the point of least

resistance...the weakest part of the decision making structure, the lowest member of the <real> hierarchy...the least skilled (or liked) member of the team...etc.

If you've read Jung, the mythical characters are repeated (archetypes)...leader or hero, shadow or devil, anima or mother, self or organization.

The shadow is the weak point and the label shifts as the organizational players turn over. Every clan has a black sheep and the role gets tough when the environmental pressure is on. When you kill off a black sheep, a new one is invented. I've seen it get so chaotic that the organization starts to develop a prioritized stockpile of grey sheep to replace departing sacrificial black sheep.

The organizational mythology develops as a 'consensual hallucination' that's easier to swallow than 'things are really awful right now'. This is how humans usually react to deep environmental stress.

It would be nice if there were cookbook solutions and quick fixes..There aren't. Organizations go through metamorphoses like caterpillars into butterflies. It just takes the time it takes. Unlike the butterfly, the human transition can be a decision. It can be imagined, charted, scheduled, budgeted, agreed to, discussed etc. At the bottom line is a decision to get on with it.

Just as you probably never imagined what you'd be when you grow up, organizations are notably bad at predicting their real future. In the best cases, you make a map, head off in a direction and modify for reality (that wonderfully fickle beast).. Where you end up is a question of luck, timing and good planning. Where you are heading is the most important decision that you can control.

At the point of taking charge of direction, the leader becomes the organization's lightning rod. Now there is somebody to blame. It's a precarious moment in time. If the leader's boss doesn't understand the natural ebb and flow of organizational life, (s)he is in jeopardy. Things will not go the way you planned and the 'peasants will be revolting' ;-). This is progress although it rarely feels like it to the leader or the team. The black sheep is welcomed back into the fold and the leader starts to take the 'shit' that was being pawned off on the black sheep. Being a lightning rod means being struck by lightning.....it hurts!

I think it was Eisenhower who said..."The plan is nothing; planning is everything."

What he meant was that reality will interfere with your desire to control it. This does not absolve you of the responsibility to try. When reality imposes its harsh discipline, it is the responsibility of the leader to decide and move on.

This is the final challenge in leadership...being the lightning rod never stops and you are going to make mistakes that cause more lightning as you go on. You have to have a masochistic streak to volunteer for this kind of duty. The benefits from taking the position are: a kind of wisdom unobtainable any other way, accomplishment and, if you're lucky, increasing personal flexibility and vision.

It's possible to make collective leadership work, but there has to be a shared understanding of the prices and benefits of leadership. The reason most organizations are headed by individuals is that it takes a LOT of extra work to reach the communications levels required for collective decision making.

By the way, these principles apply whether the leadership task is centralized in an individual or distributed in a collective or any of the various forms along that spectrum.

2.0 Goals and Objectives

There are two levels to this discussion. One is the metatopic about the importance of having clear goals. The other is the specific goals a Millennium Whole Earth Catalog Project might have.

2.1 Metatopic

Clear, usable goals are always deeply rooted in the fundamental principles of the organization or individual.

The single most important goal of the organization is its continued survival. As you will see in the following budget section, this translates directly into setting aside 25% of the catalog advance as 'profit'. This would be standard practice in a commercial organization. Interestingly, this profit set aside (temporarily) solves the WER cash flow problem. The budget notes show a realistic plan for developing a 500 page catalog based on current magazine production costs given this profit set aside.

After survival, comes the future.

There will be an extraordinary temptation to immediately begin the design and production of the project. Intensely anxious times crave detailed productive results. There's something deeply reassuring about getting your fingernails dirty. But, the more elusive task of planning the consequences of the project must have a higher priority.

The operative question here is: "What do we want this project to do for our group?" The answers range from the mundane (improved capabilities, better facilities, nicer computers) to the sublime (fame, a bully pulpit, increased readership). The important thing is to get as explicit as possible.

The section on the MWEC as a platform for growth provides some potential ideas for future oriented goals. The key in developing an overall strategy is ensuring the the content, process and budget goals support the longer range aspirations.

2.2 Budget Notes

The very first thing that should be done with the approximately $400K contract is that $100K (25%) be set aside as 'profit". This will both immediately reduce internal expectations and provide insulation against disaster on the project.

A second "Management reserve" of 15% to 20% should be set aside as a part of each editor's cost management strategy.

I've built a simple top level book plan based on current magazine costs.

From the 25th Anniversary Issue Financial report, and based on four 148 Page Issues, the per page cost for a new page is $932. This is between 15% and 40% higher than overpriced Defense Industry publication norms. The Defense Industry standards assume from scratch graphics development, 50% of costs devoted to writing and about 20% of costs devoted to the editorial function

	Pages	Expense	Per Page	Industry Avg
Magazine	592	$817,841	$1,381	
Minus Printing	592	$105,144	$178	Higher
Minus Promotion	592	$115,817	$196	Higher
Minus Newsstand	592	$22,880	$39	
Minus Book Expense	592	$22,531	$38	
Net Per Page Costs	592	$551,468	$932	**$650 -$800**

Without questioning the core productivity (that is, assuming that $932 per new page really is reasonable), a basic book plan can be projected. The catalog will inevitably be a mix of brand new pages, modified versions of existing pages and direct lifts of existing pages.

Based on my experience, I estimate that a modified page costs 50% of a new page. I also estimate that a direct lift costs 20% of a new page.

I tentatively estimated new computer hardware at $50K.

I estimated that the catalog would contain:

New Pages	40%
Modified Pages	30%
Direct Lifts	30%

On a production budget of $250K, that yields a catalog with the following characteristics:

At Current Productivity	Percentage of New Page	Page Cost	Percentage of Catalog	Page Count	Total Cost
New Pages	100.00%	$932	40.00%	176	$163,934
Modified Pages	50.00%	$466	30.00%	132	$61,475
Direct Lift	20.00%	$186	30.00%	132	$24,590
Bottom Line				**440**	**$250,000**

For the computer investment to be cost effective, it would have to yield a net productivity improvement of 10% to 20% or an additional 44 to 88 pages of content. Therefore, it is reasonable to forecast an overall book plan that looks something like this:

15% Gain In Productivity	Percentage of New Page	Page Cost	Percentage of Catalog	Page Count	Total Cost
New Pages	100.00%	$792	40.00%	207	$163,934
Modified Pages	50.00%	$396	30.00%	155	$61,475
Direct Lift	20.00%	$158	30.00%	155	$24,590
Bottom Line				**517**	**$250,000**

It's important to remember that these costs include all 'overhead functions' and are not pure production budgets. Based on an assumed average salary and benefits package, another way of looking at these figures is:

Number of People	Page Cost	Editorial 6	Graphics 2	Overhead 6	Total Budget 14
New Pages	$932	$70,258	$23,419	$70,258	$163,934
Modified Pages	$466	$26,347	$8,782	$26,347	$61,475
Direct Lift	$186	$10,539	$3,513	$10,539	$24,590
Total Budget		**$107,143**	**$35,714**	**$107,143**	**$250,000**
Reserve		**$21,429**	**$7,143**	**$21,429**	**$50,000**
Allocation		**$85,714**	**$28,571**	**$85,714**	**$200,000**

Obviously, this simple analysis is flawed in its assumptions. The average salary and benefits packages are likely to be skewed in favor of the Editorial staff. Overhead costs assume that there is some equivalent function for both subscription fulfillment and the Executive Director. Writing and Graphics 'costs' as defined in the Financial statement have been left in all numbers.

However, this baseline shows the approximate magnitude of budgets in the basic 'departments'. The budget reserve should be seen as a way of setting aggressive 'real' productivity improvement targets. Each person with responsibility for spending money should have a basic spending plan and schedule of accomplishment. Routine review of both spending and schedule progress will attempt to keep project costs within allocation.

The decision to plan to spend any of the reserve should be left in the hands of the 'head bad guy'. It should be a decision of last resort.

The bottom line is that a 500 page catalog should be easily produced on a budget that looks like:

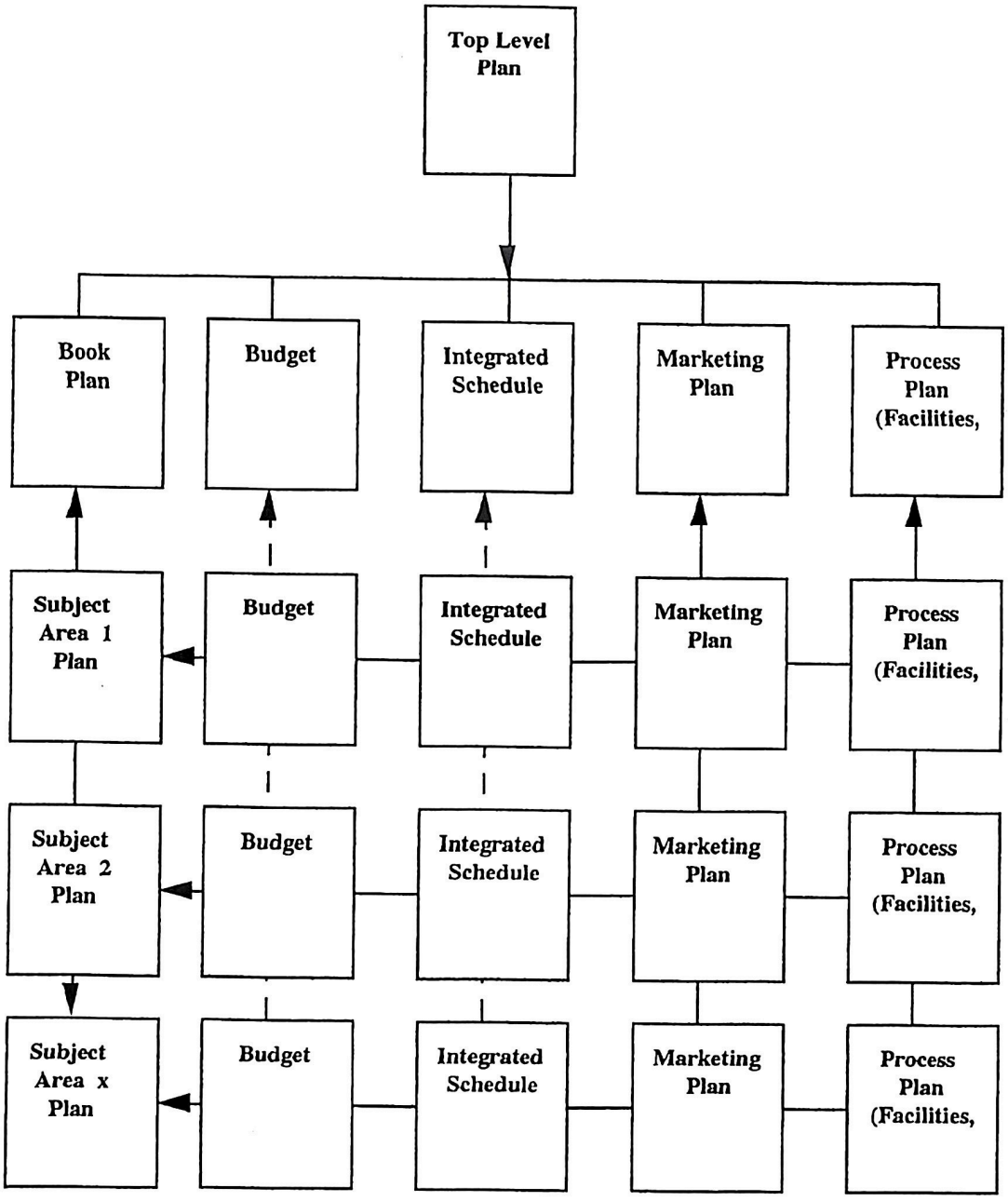
Editorial	$ 85,714
Graphics	$ 28,571
Overhead	$ 85,714
Reserve	$ 50,000
Computers	$ 50,000
Profit	$100,000

With 40% New pages, 30% modified pages and 30% direct lift pages. (These numbers include rent, supplies and postage shared on a pro-rata basis).

2.1 Integrating the Forest and The Trees

Each person in the organization should have a written statement of their goals available for all to review. Ideally, personal and developmental goals have equal footing with organizational goals. However, personal choice and organizational reality will be modifiers to this principle.

Heirarchy of Goals



The statement should be simple and cover

a. What am I responsible for?
b. How am I measuring progress?
c. What do I hope to learn from or get out of this project.
d. Who do I talk to about decisions and how do I make the ones that are mine??
e. When is it due (in detail)?
f. How much will it cost to finish?

g. How much has it cost so far?
h. How am I improving the way I do things (faster, cheaper, better)?
i. Who are my customers (internal and external)?

Although the chart entitled "Hierarchy of Goals" looks complex and cumbersome, it simply points out the importance of:

a. The overall plan including survival and the future;
b. The importance of decentralized decision making in the context of the overall plan; and,
c. The importance of everyone having a view of their role in the big picture.

A constant and routine review of the full plan is critical to project function and success.

3.0 Process

Core question here is: Is this Just another Whole Earth catalog? Perhaps importing some cheap cyberpunks and anarchists would enliven the mix. (WELL accounts, food, lodging and a stipend). Why not offer Rush Limbaugh a hand in the process? The key question for the process of getting inputs is how to make it absolutely cutting edge. There's an edge missing in a mostly white middle aged group that sees itself as the edge.

4.0 Content

Obviously, the MWEC can not be all things to all people. A clearly defined set of content objectives will aid in decision making for several sets of people:

a. Provides guidance to potential contributors
b. Provides guidance for editorial decision making

It would be prudent to target content decisions to follow-on markets. The MWEC is future oriented.

Also, more evaluative information might make it a better catalog.

Here are two examples:

Systemantics
This is one of the neatest things WEC pointed me to. It's an easy read with the wisdom of experience. However, it's a terror to find. I spent years with it on my list including ordering it three times.

5 Myths of Television Power
The ideas expressed in this book deserve a broad hearing. It's easy to get a hold of currently. However, it's an absolutely miserable read. Davis may have the longest most tortured sentence structure in the trade.

Solid information about access to these tools ought to include caveats. A small graphic showing Information (Content), Accessibility (Physical) and Readability would be a real value added feature.

5.0 MWEC As A Growth Platform

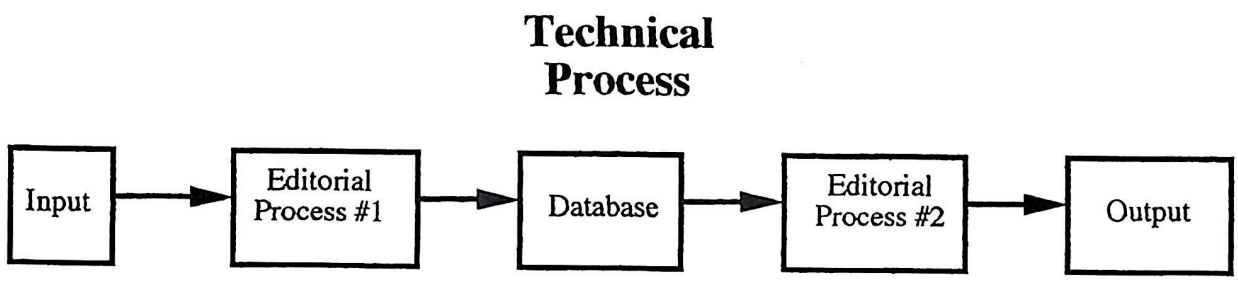
As the catalog enters the fall market, the WER 'machine' should be primed and prepared for an aggressive PR campaign.

The object is not the catalog but the related 'industries'. Some shameless promoting of well defined future objectives should be laced through the catalog.

Perhaps a word of mouth / bumper sticker campaign,,,,The Millennium is Coming

6.0 Technical Organization (Production Processes)

A Production design process, using Total Quality techniques and involving as many hands on participants as possible, would have major long range benefits. See section 9.0.



5.1 Input

The overall objective in designing the input process must be to maximize usable input while minimizing input processing. A set of file input standards, while somewhat reducing the potential volume of input will probably be most cost effective.

An upfront policy defining the 'royalty stream' from inputs will offset much of the lost volume caused by standards. Royalty stream definitions will need to include potential revenue from alternate distribution media, payment thresholds etc. It would be prudent to cover WEC/WER/Point reproduction rights upfront and over some term. This will reduce the administrative overhead for alternate distribution.

Having a personal e-mail address associated with each review or reviewer will both expand the networking influence of the product and reduce the follow up overhead. Fledgling reviewers will find this type of publicity very useful.

This raises the question of contributor network maintenance. This is discussed in the Marketing section.

6.1.1 Formats

.....Just pick some and stick to them. Lot's of neat translator tools in CLARIS and FGM graphics. Avoid doing the same job twice.

6.2 Editorial Process #1 (Input Smoothing and Verification)

The goal of Editorial process #1 should be to maximize the content of the Database. Maximizing content at the raw input phase, with minor editorial and administrative work will optimize the flexibility of the database for alternative products and distribution approaches.

As a first stage production process, its output should be relatively predictable in several dimensions.

a. Error free spelling
b. A range of images associated with each article or review
c. Accurate cross referencing to related material
d. Confirmation of authorship, payment information, author's email address
e. Release verification etc.

6.3 Database

The Database of text and graphics ought to be as input and output friendly as possible. Relational organization will be important for future products whether they be new distribution media or niche markets.

6.4 Editorial Process # 2

This is the more traditional editorial process. Once the data is in the data base, it can be refined for publication at any time. This process is the electronic equivalent of proofreading, paseteup etc.

6.5 Output

6.5.1 Catalog

6.5.2 CD-ROM

6.5.3 Searchable Database

6.5.4 Output Distribution Channels

6.5.5 Shareware Distribution

6.5.6 Other . Channels

6.6 Equipment Decisions and Tradeoffs

Any Production design done without accounting for Strategic Objectives in Marketing, Distribution, Follow On Business Development and Basic Production Processes will be seriously flawed.

A coherent roadmap of the production process and the future is necessary to keep production equipment investment cost-effective.

7.0 Socio-Political Organization (Org Charts)

7.1 Organization Must Be Driven By Shared Goals

7.2 Organization Must Be Driven By Content Quality

7.3 Organization Must Be Driven By Marketing and Follow-On Business Objectives

7.4 Organization Must Be Driven By Process Quality

8.0 Marketing

8.1 Customer Orientation

8.2 Benefits, Benefits, Benefits

8.3 Effective Targeting

8.4 Graphic Image

8.5 Grabber Slogan

8.6 The Infomercial

I watched the Rolling Stone 25th Anniversary Time-Life CD Infomercial the other night and wondered if there wasn't an opportunity to build a WER/WEC Infomercial. Why not?

8.7 Market Development Tie-Ins

8.7.1 --PBS Membership Promotions

Also helps in building media network. Requires several conversations with market director of PBS radio and TV outlets in all markets. Free catalog or subscription.

8.7.2 Internet Based National Project

8.8 Contributor Network Maintenance.and Development

8.9 Reader / Subscriber / Customer Maintenance and Development

8.10 Building a Network Of Customers

8.0 Follow-On Business Development

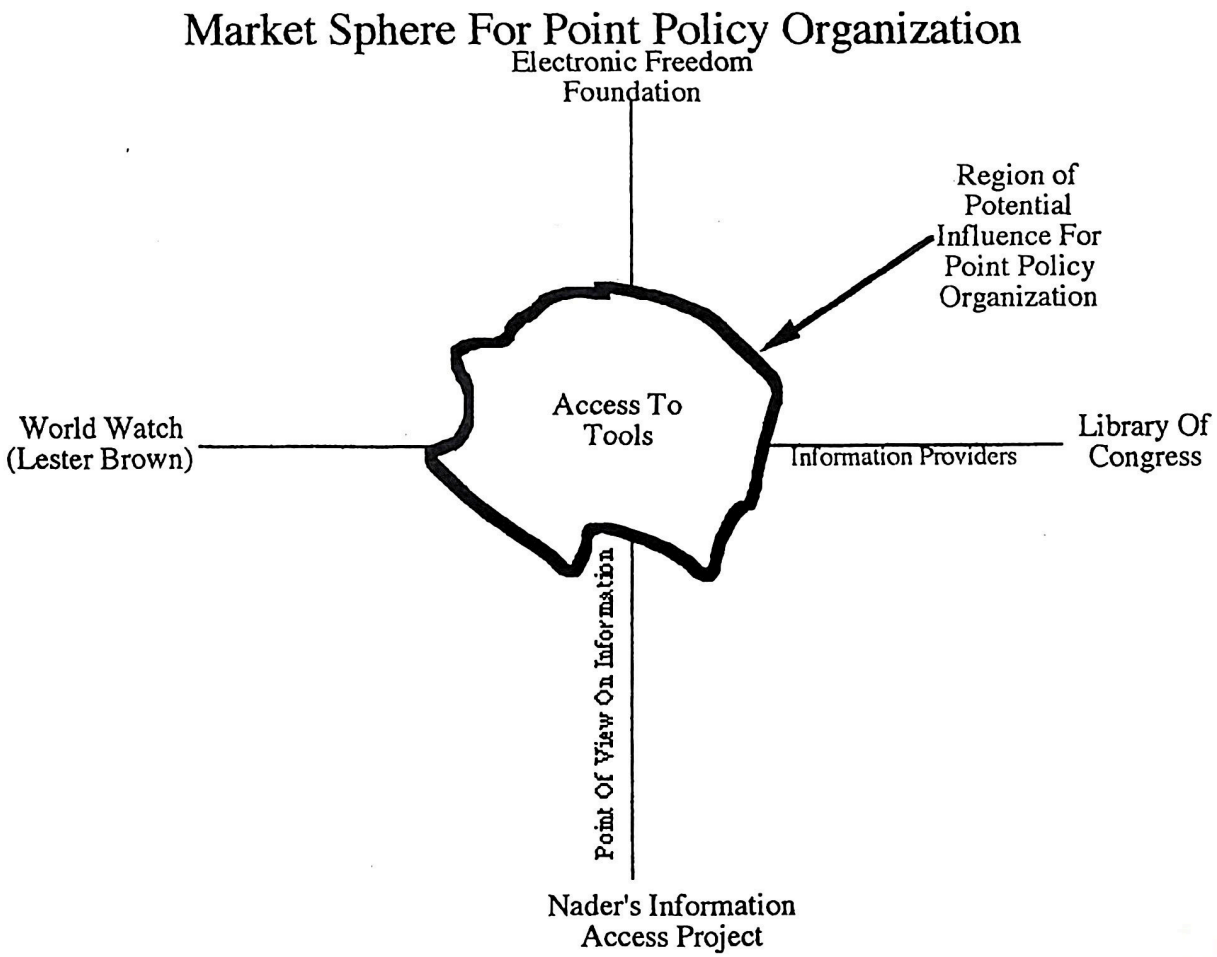
9.1 Potential Alliances

9.1.1 Electronic News Distribution

9.1.2 Cable Companies

9.1.3 On Line Services

9.2 Issues Based Policy Arm: Access To Tools


Market Sphere For Point Policy Organization
Electronic Freedom Foundation
Region of Potential Influence For Point Policy Organization
World Watch (Lester Brown)
Access To Tools
Information Providers
Library Of Congress
Point Of View On Information
Nader's Information Access Project

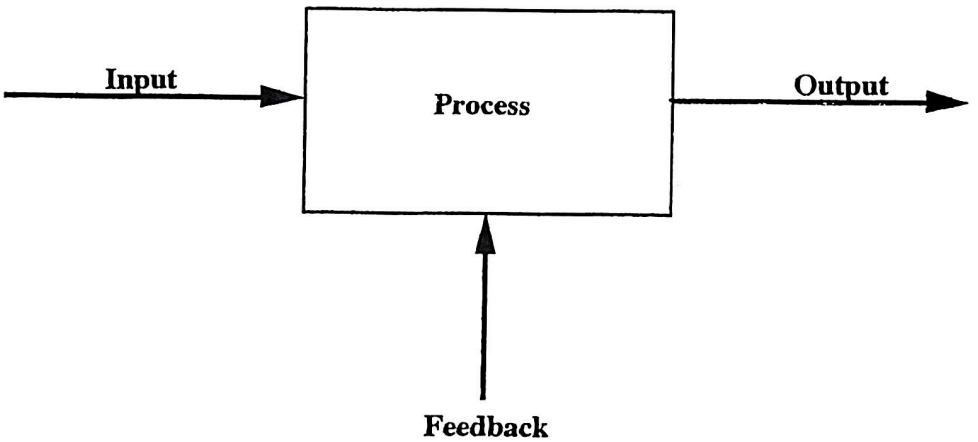
10.0 Total Quality Process

At its essence, Total Quality Management is the addition of a quantifiable feedback loop to routinely performed tasks.. Measurement is what it's all about.

Done well, TQM can take an organization to an exciting performance level. The group can become self-conscious of and improvement oriented towards its sustaining processes.

The first step is to agree to a definition of those processes. If done at the start of a project, TQM can be used to define the processes. A simple way of doing this is to take some easel paper and 'post-it-notes' into a room and define and assess the basic tasks that have to be performed and their relationship to each other.

Once the processes are defined, throughput measures for each process can be developed



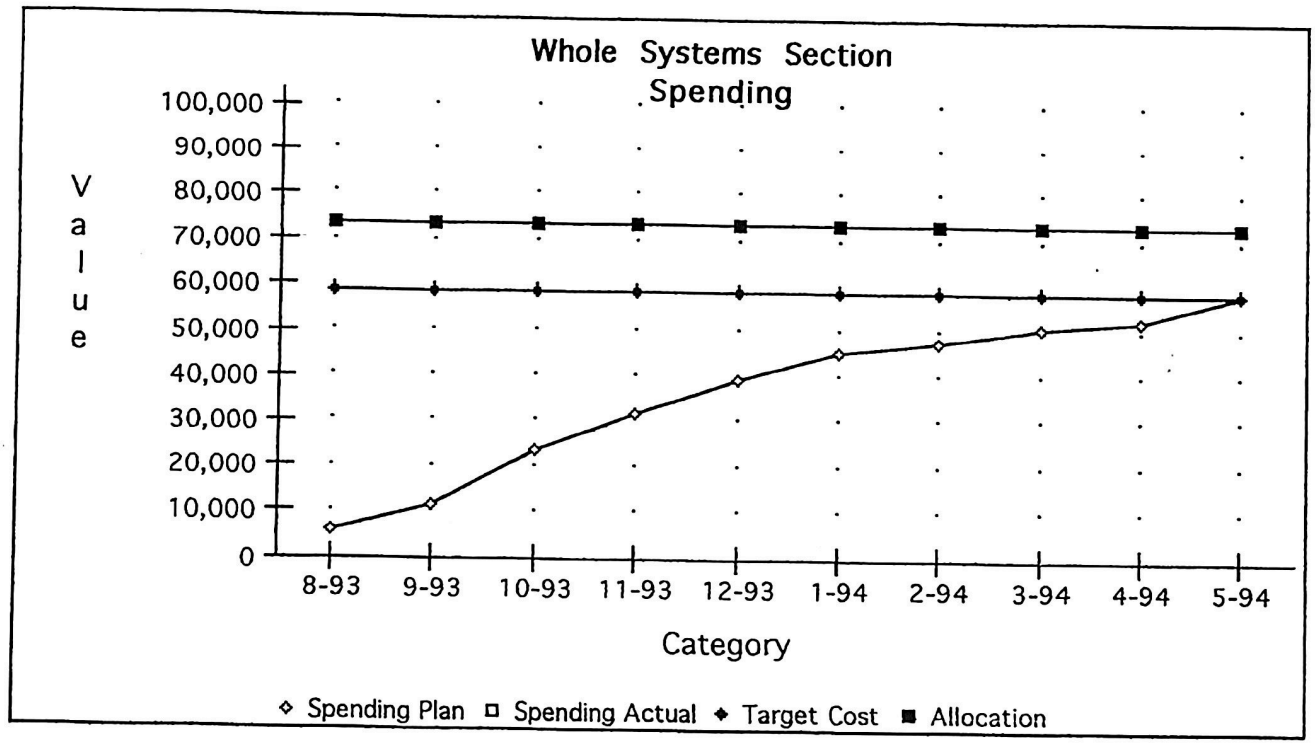
The next two pages contain a basic sample plan for a whole systems section. The raw numbers are taken from the Whole Systems Section of the Essential Whole Earth Catalog. Spend plan is based on an "average page" and includes graphics, editing and overhead functions. This is hardly the only way you could chart and measure progress. It is a simple and useful one.

Please take special note of the Completed Articles Plan. It shows actual expenses against the plan. When performance is over or under the plan, a potential problem is indicated. This kind of tracking is most useful in the early determination of problems.

Other measures might be: Accuracy of Input, Articles In the Data base, Email addresses of authors, defined graphics requirements, promotional activities.

Once the measures that are to be used have been defined, a routine review (monthly?) should be held. With measures in hand, it's a great opportunity to share improvements, wrestle with systemic problems and generally take stock.

Done well, this process can drive decision making to the people who really know the answer. It also really frees the group to concentrate on getting the job done.


Whole Systems Section
Spending
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80,000
70,000
60,000
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40,000
30,000
20,000
10,000
0
8-93
9-93
10-93
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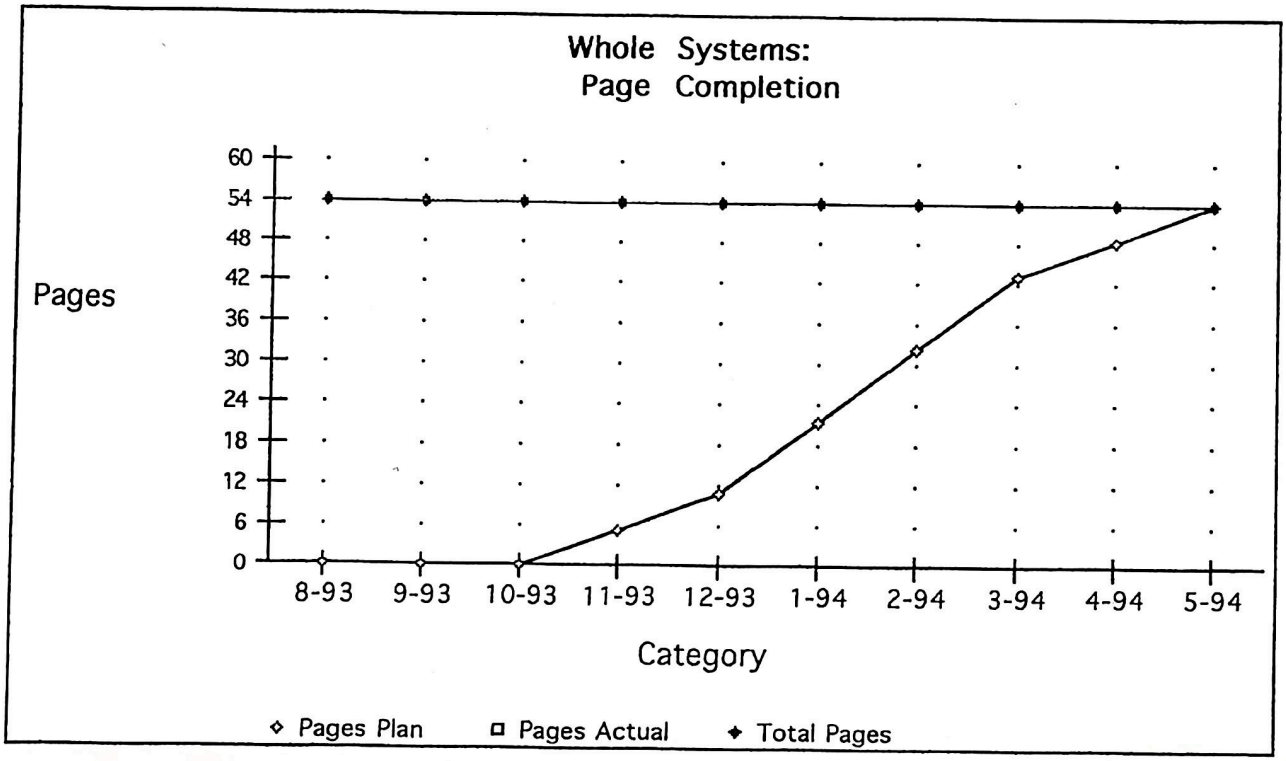
1-94
2-94
3-94
4-94
5-94
Category
Spending Plan
Spending Actual
Target Cost
Allocation


Whole Systems:
Page Completion
Pages
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54
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42
36
30
24
18
12
6
0
8-93
9-93
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12-93
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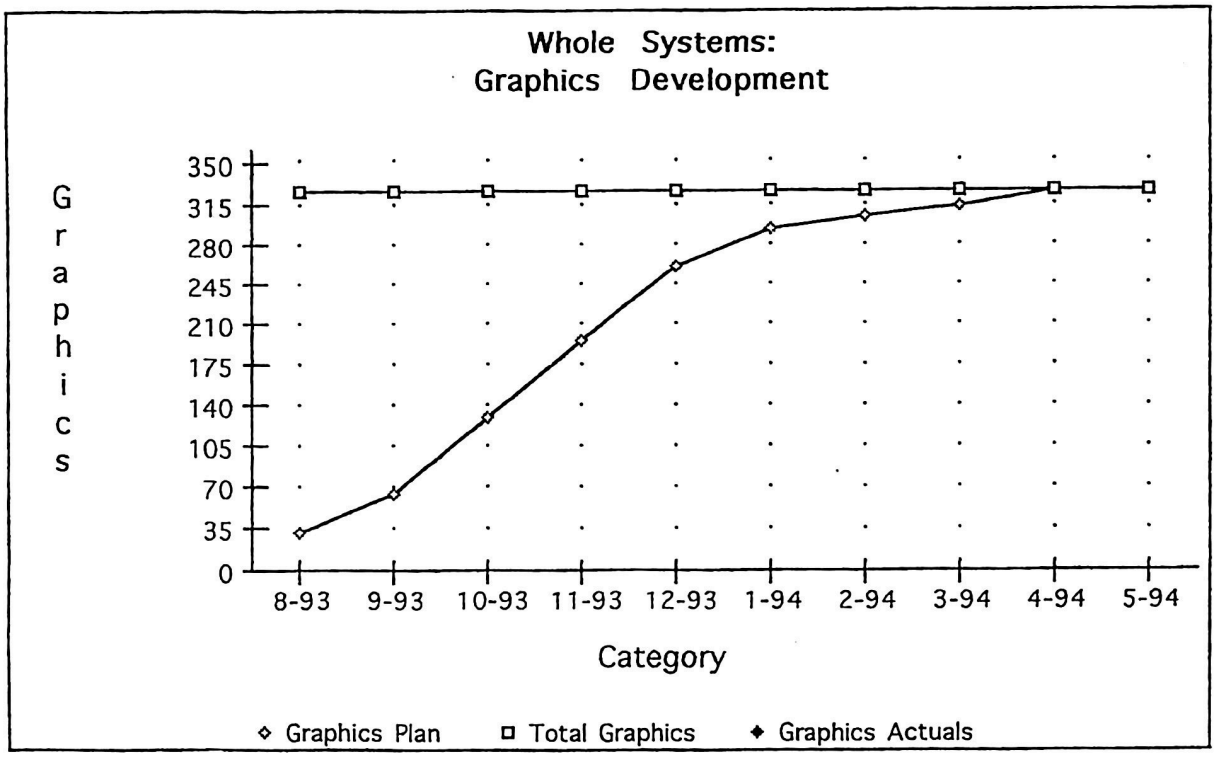
4-94
5-94
Category
Pages Plan
Pages Actual
Total Pages


Whole Systems:
Graphics Development
Graphics
350
315
280
245
210
175
140
105
70
35
0
8-93
9-93
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12-93
1-94
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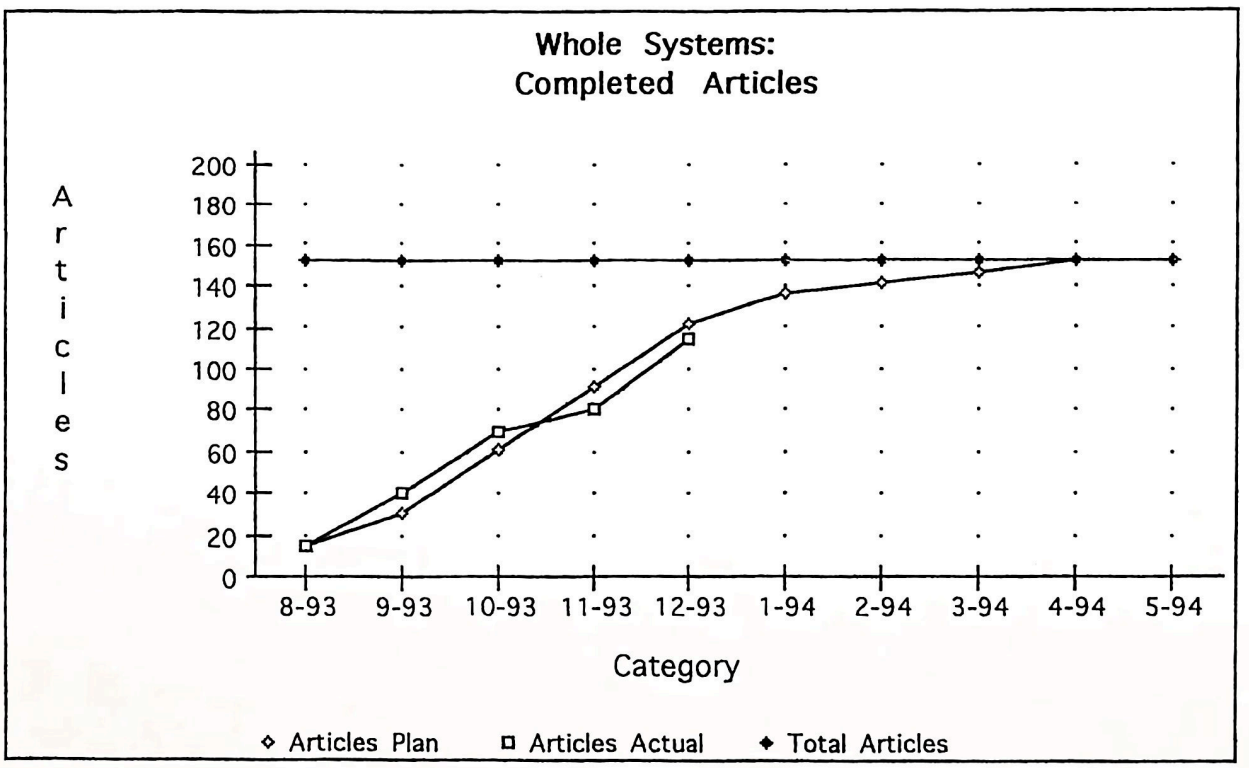
3-94
4-94
5-94
Category
Graphics Plan
Total Graphics
Graphics Actuals


Whole Systems:
Completed Articles
Articles
200
180
160
140
120
100
80
60
40
20
0
8-93
9-93
10-93
11-93
12-93
1-94
2-94
3-94
4-94
5-94
Category
Articles Plan
Articles Actual
Total Articles

11.0 Conclusions and Questions